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SUBJECT: PASTOR ESPINOZA DISCUSSES EVANGELICAL POLITICAL STATUS AND CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On June 14, Ambassador Trivelli and Foreign Affairs Officer met with Mario Espinoza Gonzalez, Presidente Nacional of the Consejo Nacional de Pastores Evangelicos de Nicaragua, an umbrella organization that according to Espinoza, represents more than 400 pastors of all evangelical denominations in 122 municipalities throughout the country. The purpose of the meeting was to hear Espinoza's views on current political developments in the country. In addition to his allegations that Catholic clergy continue to receive preferential treatment in Nicaraguan society, Espinoza wants the Nicaraguan political establishment to recognize evangelical Protestant pastors and their flocks as a political force to be reckoned with in future leadership decision-making. END SUMMARY.

A GROWING DEMOGRAPHIC AND POLITICAL GROUP

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¶2. (U) Pastor Espinoza averred that at present approximately 34% of the Nicaraguan population is evangelical Protestant and that some towns are nearly 100% evangelical. With regard to political leanings, Espinoza claimed that the evangelical churches have no single political party and that evangelical pastors are members of all national political affiliations, including about 2% who are FSLN (Sandinista) supporters. He asserted that the evangelical church has not yet defined a presidential candidate that it favors for the upcoming elections.

WE WANT MORE ACCESS TO THE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT

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¶3. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that currently, Nicaraguans have five candidates to chose from, who represent different democratic options, in contrast to the bi-polar situation of past elections. Espinoza noted that evangelicals are concerned about the current Bolanos government because it has remained distant from evangelicals, despite the fact that evangelicals were among the first groups to openly support President Bolanos. Further, claimed Espinoza, Bolanos has not accorded them the same accessibility to high level officials that Roman Catholic Church leaders enjoy.

¶4. (SBU) Espinoza also alleged that Catholic missionary clergy are given open access at airports to enter the country, whereas evangelicals are subject to luggage searches and "formalities." He also referred to subsidies that the state allegedly provides to Catholic cultural and other facilities, and wants evangelicals to have the same access

and clout that he claims the Catholic clergy currently enjoys. He acknowledged that evangelical groups in Nicaragua receive substantial financial and other support from U.S. evangelical churches.

PASTORS' INFLUENCE OVER THEIR FLOCKS

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¶ 15. (SBU) Espinoza claimed that presidential candidate Eduardo Montealegre does not have sufficiently close ties with evangelical churches. The Ambassador noted by contrast that a number of the Liberal Youth, whom he had met that same day, and who support Montealegre, told him that they were evangelicals. Espinoza countered that he would like to see more persons who are demonstrably evangelical in high government positions.

¶ 16. (SBU) In his concluding remarks, Espinoza underscored his message that evangelical pastors command the allegiance of large numbers of people in their many churches throughout the country, and are a political force to be taken seriously. He also took the opportunity to allege divine retribution against the Sandinista leadership, in particular Daniel Ortega, citing Chapter 5. 26 from the Book of Daniel referencing the destruction of the Babylonian King Balshazzar's empire due to his arrogance in the sight of God.

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